

Scott McCoy, Associate Editor

# Reality Check! Training for an Operatic Career

Robert C. White, Jr. and Lenore Rosenberg



Robert C. White, Jr.



Lenore Rosenberg

The following dialogue between Robert C. White, Jr. and Lenore Rosenberg, Director, Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, The Metropolitan Opera, is a collaborative composite of several informal conversations about areas of mutual concern on the realities of becoming an opera singer and the education needed to do it.

**RCW:** You have several impressive titles: Associate Artistic Administrator of the Metropolitan Opera, Director of the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program and Music Administrator of the Spoleto Festival, U.S.A. What specifically do you do?

**LR:** As Associate Artistic Administrator, I'm responsible for the first level of auditioning and casting for all supporting roles and covers for the Met season. I say first level because Maestro Levine and the General Director, Peter Gelb, must approve all final casting. As Director of the Lindemann Program, I am responsible for auditioning and selecting singers for this apprentice program (again with approval of Maestro Levine), overseeing the day-to-day progress of their training and casting them in supporting roles in Met productions. For The Spoleto Festival I cast the operas and concert soloists.

**RCW:** So a tremendous amount of your time is given to hearing singers, not only for general talent and career readiness, but also for specific assignments in operatic repertory. Is all of this done in New York?

**LR:** Not at all. I travel throughout the United States to hear singers both in performance and audition situations at summer festivals, at apprentice programs at other opera companies, and as a judge for The Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions and other competitions.

**RCW:** Do you travel outside the country as well?

**LR:** Yes, to hear people in performance and auditions for casting at the Met and to judge international competitions.

**RCW:** You do get a different perspective from this. I have students who have been singing in Europe for many years, and visiting them has made me aware of differences in standards, demands, and opportunities, especially with the decline in government support. The sure-fire audition tour to Germany, for

example, is not so sure-fire any more. So what can you say about the current competition in the American operatic world?

**LR:** It is true that in the United States there are more opera companies than there were fifty years ago, but there also has been an increase in the number of schools that offer degrees in vocal performance. But it isn't just about the numbers. Of the hundreds of singers I audition, only a very small percentage is actually of interest. Very few are hireable and the differences between those who are hireable and those who are not are very clear.

**RCW:** What specifically are you listening for?

**LR:** In addition to the natural beauty of the voice, singers must sing with good intonation, a steady, free tone, a usable range that is audible throughout, musical expressivity, correct, clear diction (in several languages), and sense of musical style. They should also offer repertory that is right for their voice.

**RCW:** What about physical appearance? Can this limit a singer's chances of being hired?

**LR:** These days, the answer to this must be "yes." In today's operatic reality, stage directors often have the deciding vote on casting. It isn't just abstract physical beauty, but the appropriateness of the singer's appearance for a specific role as that director sees it. There are also the issues of opera telecasts, sales of DVDs, etc., and the fact that the new audiences which opera needs to attract were largely raised on television and film.

**RCW:** This is a hard issue for me as a voice teacher when I encounter a fine tenor who happens to be five feet three inches tall and I know will never be cast in the romantic roles he longs to sing. It's not fair to take someone like this all the way through a master's program in vocal performance without a reality check. That being said, there are supporting roles and character roles that might be totally appropriate.

**LR:** Exactly! It is amazing that so many singers have looked only at the major roles in an opera (or even only the major arias of that role) and know nothing of the supporting or minor roles.

**RCW:** So, we've established that the competition is fierce, physical appearance will be a prime consideration, the

sheer number of singers is staggering, yet the actual pool of qualified candidates has shrunk. What is causing this?

**LR:** There seems to be a gap between what the schools want a singer to learn in order to get a degree and what the singer actually needs to learn in order to be hired as a performer. Some people teaching voice in universities never had performing careers, but even teachers who *have* had careers don't know how the profession has changed or they are living in cultural isolation to the degree that they don't know what is needed to be hired today. Students need to be told: "You are *here*—you need to get to *there*—and *this* is how to do it."

**RCW:** So what do singers need in the way of training?

**LR:** First and foremost, they must have a secure vocal technique. The technical aspect that is most often missing in the vast majority of singers I hear is a *reliable breathing technique*.

**RCW:** Well, you have hit a real nerve here. In the past twenty years, most of my studio work has been with professional singers or those who expect to be, many of whom have arrived in New York with master degrees or with years and years of vocal training. In nine out of ten cases I have had to do serious retraining in fundamental breathing technique. Many of these singers, even those with good enough sounds actually to do serious professional work, have never made the connection between their breath management and a free phonation. They haven't even talked about it. Subsequently, they might make a good initial impression in an audition, but they cannot live up to the demands of a rehearsal schedule or show any consistency. I've seen many tears of frustration shed over the years wasted when these fundamentals could and should have been established in the very first year of study.

**LR:** I'm sure that's true.

**RCW:** What else is needed?

**LR:** Well, good breath support should eliminate most of the other issues, but a singer cannot have throat tension, jaw tension, or anything that gets in the way of pronouncing words clearly. That also goes for excessive vowel modification and any facial tension or quirks that interfere with diction and expression.

**RCW:** And?

**LR:** Languages: the study of both diction and language itself. Italian, French, and German are absolutely required, and now with the advent of subtitles and surtitles, Czech and Russian should be studied as well. I have never fired anyone because his or her languages were too *good!*

**RCW:** Go on.

**LR:** Well, obviously musicianship and anything that will enhance a student's musicality. There seems to be a profound lack of understanding these days that the point of opera is the expression of the drama through the music. The music is not "in addition" to the drama. If the composer has done his job, it's all in the music, but I find that singers I audition often don't know the correct *tempi*, are not observing dynamic markings, and don't understand the style of the musical era. They don't seem to realize how much information is on a page beside pitches and rhythms.

**RCW:** I find this true also. Students have studied many semesters of music history, and have memorized names and dates, but they don't relate to the actual *sound* of the music or understand how these sounds are part of a cultural context, which includes art, architecture, drama, poetry, etc. Understanding this can open up a lot of possibilities for alternative repertory as well, but I want to talk about that later.

**LR:** Young operatic singers need acting technique and stage skills, and last, but not least, audition savvy. By that I mean they, and the teachers who guide them, need to know exactly what repertory they should be singing, and for what roles in which theaters they are singing it. Young singers tend to offer in audition any five arias "because my teacher told me to learn them," rather than because they have thought about what they can show of themselves in the aria that will get them a job.

**RCW:** Five! I'm shocked. I expect my students to have fifteen! Well, maybe that's excessive, but considering the auditions in New York for contemporary opera groups, chamber opera companies, Baroque opera organizations, semistaged readings, etc., my students would be truly disadvantaged if they stuck to five arias from standard repertory.

**LR:** This is just as applicable outside New York.

**RCW:** So, having established these criteria for training, you place a lot of responsibility on the voice teacher.

**LR:** The voice teacher and the school, which decides the curriculum and who teaches it. The voice teacher *does* have the major responsibility, since he/she establishes the vocal technique, the most crucial element, and makes critical decisions about the appropriateness of the repertory.

**RCW:** Also, the voice teacher is usually the primary advisor, mentor, and advocate for the singer with the rest of the supporting faculty—coaches, conductors, opera studio directors, etc. Where do you see the breakdown?

**LR:** It's largely in the hiring and promotion practices. Some schools make a policy of hiring only singers who have had major careers. This person may be a great teacher, or may not. The singing career does not automatically assure good teaching. Many schools require a doctoral degree, as if that guaranteed good teaching. Who makes the decision of whom to hire? The Dean? Does he/she know anything about vocal training? I, for instance, wouldn't presume to judge the merits of a clarinet teacher.

**RCW:** You've made several sensitive points here. I felt that I had to earn a doctoral degree to survive in academia, but it is not the *crucial* factor in any success I might have had as a teacher. It seems to me that a voice teacher first must be a trained singer who has very clear physical sensations of what unrestricted singing feels like; second, he/she must have the ability to convey these sensations to the student; and third, he/she must have the ears to discriminate whether the student has or has not achieved them. I also feel that the voice teacher must have performed as a singer in public performance, not necessarily extensively. Singers with *great* performing careers have the added advantage of their experience with various conductors and stage directors, and their general knowledge of the profession. But, as you caution, this is a *changing* profession and what might have worked even ten years ago may not be applicable today. I also have strong feelings that coach-pianists, however fine their auditory discriminations, should not teach voice *production*.

It has always seemed to me that the crucial factor in hiring a voice teacher should be an evaluation of the success of his or her students, but this is rarely considered. We've both heard of situations where a music department search committee has had to pass over someone with exemplary teaching credentials because the college administration would only permit PhDs to be interviewed. Or, where a fine baritone/teacher has been passed over because the music department needed a mezzo soprano to fill out the college's requirement to maintain a faculty quartet. On the bright side, however, I find that more and more schools are requiring demonstration teaching as part of the voice teacher interview process.

**LR:** That is certainly positive, but it also requires a very secure existing faculty who could conceivably be evaluating better teaching than they themselves are capable of.

**RCW:** Given the achievement of a good singing technique, the acquisition of language, acting skills, and the other elements you've mentioned, what additional advice can you offer to aspiring opera singers?

**LR:** It's important to have or to develop a constitution that can hear "no" more frequently than "yes," and not be destroyed or discouraged. This is not to say they shouldn't pay attention to the results they are getting as they go from a school to a "bigger pond." But young singers don't understand that if they get one nibble from twelve auditions, they are doing well. Both teachers and students also need to do more homework on what they are auditioning for. For example, in apprentice programs some concentrate on outreach programs, others on training singers for casting in secondary roles, and others on ensemble participation with general training as a separate entity. Students should know what they want and should also know what the company wants of them. They should find out the size of the theater. Does the company perform in original languages or English, and again, who makes the decisions about casting? Is it a conductor? A director? An administrator? Do they do operetta and/or music theater repertory? Contests are also somewhat different from job auditions, first of all because the singer is competing with singers in other voice categories, which is an unrealistic situation. The singer should be able to tailor his/her audition list to the situation.

**RCW:** I have a general lecture I give to each to student who enters my studio for the first time, that their goal should be to make as much of their living as a singer as they possibly can. For some it will be ten percent, for some fifty percent, and for others it could be a full time international career. Most singers realize that a full time career as a singer will involve opera (or music theater for those so inclined), since even concert work is often given to those who have established some name for themselves first in the operatic world. However, flexibility is crucial. Some years ago I had a young tenor who wanted more than anything else for a career in bel canto opera. He just didn't have the basic vocal equipment for it. But he persisted in his training, developed superior language and musical skills, and continuously explored vocal literature and musical style. He has made a full time living as a singer for the past twenty-five years essentially in early music. Another similar student did much the same thing specializing in contemporary music, and after twenty years turned to university teaching where he still gives recitals and concertizes. As an aside, I think it's wonderful that Maestro Levine requires the Lindemann apprentices to perform song recitals and study art song along with their operatic preparations.

**LR:** Broad preparation and flexibility are good things, but getting back to our original premise, the singers I am involved with go to school to be opera singers. Do the schools intend that, or do they have something else in mind? I am finding that the schools are not teaching to the needs of the profession. This is not just something that *could* affect opera at some vague point in the future; the lack of good training is affecting opera companies, young artist programs, and audiences *right now*. Larger numbers of singers are going to school, but the pool of graduates who are actually qualified to sing opera is smaller.

**RCW:** Admittedly, we may have some singers in training that don't belong there. But how can you discourage someone who has a passion for opera and a strong desire to sing it?

**LR:** You can't tell a nineteen year old, "You don't have it." But you can help singers correct their weaknesses and maximize their strengths. Then, ideally and perhaps with kindly guidance, they can come to their own

conclusions regarding their potential. My concern is that the professors don't *know* what the professional level needs to be, or how to *train* the student to get there.

**RCW:** If I have dedicated students that I feel have limited potential for a professional career (especially in opera), I will frequently encourage them, once they are technically secure, to enter lower level competitions or place them in situations where they can get outside evaluations. Once they have the opportunity to see what is out there and how they stack up, they often reevaluate their goals. It doesn't mean that they have to stop singing altogether.

**LR:** Yes, but if they are not successful they might blame you and leave your studio.

**RCW:** That's a risk I have to take. So, you make the point that there is a real gap between current educational programs and the current needs of opera companies. How can schools and universities get up to date with this? Would opera companies welcome a dialogue? Can you suggest practical ways this gap could be narrowed or

eliminated? It seems to me that business schools quite often consult with corporations and businesses; might there be models or precedents here?

**LR:** I know for certain that the heads of the major young artist programs all over the country (ours, Chicago, San Francisco, Houston, Santa Fe, Seattle, Washington, and Los Angeles) would welcome such a dialogue. I know, because we've had long conversations about singer training and the subject of the schools always comes up. I'm open to suggestions as to how to go about it—formally or informally, with voice teachers, with heads of opera departments, with deans, in groups or individually, through channels (such as NATS, or NASM, Opera America, National Opera Association) or directly—whatever will get the ball rolling.

**RCW:** Do you have any final words of wisdom?

**LR:** It is crucial that singers wanting an operatic career connect with the very *best* voice teacher they can find at *every stage* of the training. Students often choose a school by its name, assuming they will automatically get

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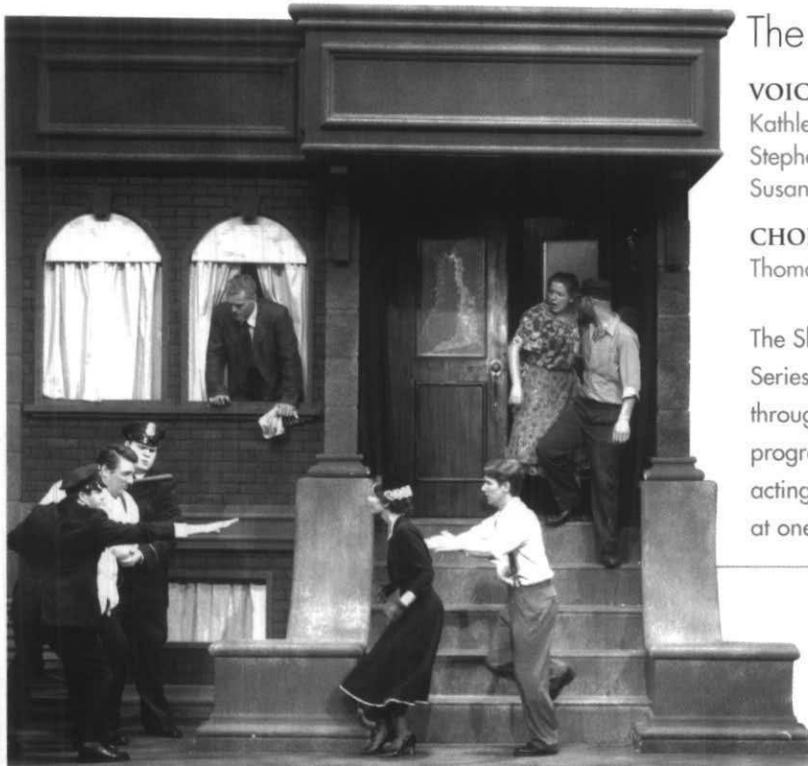
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the best teaching there. They should rather investigate the teacher and *then* choose the school, of course, looking for all the supporting training mentioned earlier. Opera singing is a tough profession and I often find myself in the unenviable position (along with colleagues in other opera companies and apprentice programs) of being the one who has to tell a singer he/she is not qualified. That's difficult in itself, but the real heartbreak occurs when you learn that said singer has accrued *one hundred thousand dollars* in student debt along the way!

**Lenore Rosenberg** is Director of the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, as well as Associate Artistic Administrator of the Metropolitan Opera. She joined the Met's artistic staff in 1985, with a background in both the performance and production aspects of opera. She has degrees in voice from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Cleveland Institute of Music. Ms. Rosenberg's previous administrative duties in the arts have included the Rehearsal Department of Lyric Opera of Chicago; Production Manager at Opera Memphis, Cincinnati Opera, and Lyric Opera Cleveland; and Business Manager of the Hartford Chamber Orchestra.

Ms. Rosenberg, who is responsible for the casting of secondary roles and covers for the Met season, is also a member of the In-House Auditions Screening Committee, as well as the Stage Audition Panel. She has been a member of the National Council Finals Jury for the past several years, and has served on international juries for the Francisco Viñas Competition in Barcelona, the Montserrat Caballe Competition in Andorra,

the Renata Tebaldi Competition in San Marino, the Ottavio Ziino Competition in Rome, and both the Rimsky-Korsakov and Elena Obraztsova Competitions in St. Petersburg, Russia. In addition, since 2001 she has been the Music Administrator of the Spoleto Festival USA, in Charleston, South Carolina.

**Robert C. White, Jr.** has maintained a private voice teaching studio in New York since 1968. He has a BS in vocal music education from Susquehanna University and MA and EdD degrees in voice pedagogy from Columbia University. He was Professor of Music for thirty-one years at the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, City University of New York, and was affiliated as an adjunct professor with Mannes College of Music for ten years. He is currently on the voice faculties of New York University and the Juilliard School.

Dr. White's students have performed at the Metropolitan Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera, San Francisco Opera, Seattle Opera, Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Covent Garden, La Scala, Opera National de Paris-Bastille, Staatsoper and Deutsche Oper, Berlin, and many other regional American and European theaters and concert halls. He has performed as a baritone soloist in recitals, oratorio, and chamber music in the New York metropolitan area, and has given lecture recitals and master classes throughout the United States and in Canada and Germany. Dr. White is coauthor with Ruth Lakeway of *Italian Art Song*, a study of twentieth century Italian song, for Indiana University Press, and has authored several articles on voice, voice pedagogy, and vocal repertory for such publications as the *Journal of Voice*, the *Music Educators Journal*, and the *American Music Teacher*.

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